

CHAPTER 15. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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The African Burial Ground, located in lower Manhattan, New York City and County, proved to be the largest excavated African cemetery from colonial America, and contained the largest sample of human skeletal remains ever studied from any African Diaspora cemetery, anywhere. The total number of graves identified in the excavated portion of the cemetery was 424, and the total number of individuals for whom skeletal remains could be inventoried numbered 419.

The area investigated archaeologically during 1991-1992 represents but a fraction—less than 4%—of the cemetery's estimated original extent. Although the maximum footprint of the New York African Burial Ground is not known, the total area designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993 is approximately seven acres, nearly 305,000 square feet. In contrast, the portion of the archaeological site where burials were excavated encompassed about 9,500 square feet. The site was located on Block 154, bounded on the north by Duane Street, on the south by Reade Street, on the west by Broadway, and on the east by Elk Street. Block 154 is now home to the 290 Broadway Federal Office Building and to a small, publicly accessible part of the cemetery where unexcavated graves are protected. The publicly accessible area is where the re-interment of the excavated remains was held in October 2003. This area memorializes all of the men, women, and children laid to rest at the African Burial Ground.

For much of the colonial period, New York City had a higher proportion of Africans in its population than any other urban center except Charleston, South Carolina. Nearly all African city residents lived under enslavement until after the Revolutionary War. Most would likely have been interred in the African Burial Ground, which was in use until 1795. While no documentation about the cemetery's opening has come to light, the African Burial Ground may have originated as early as the middle of the 17th century and no later than the beginning of the 18th century; it may have contained 15,000 or more graves.

The occupants of the graves that were excavated archaeologically constitute a large sample but cannot be assumed to be statistically representative of the entire cemetery population. Further archaeological excavation that could provide information about the majority of the individuals once interred in the entire African Burial Ground is not likely to be undertaken. Additions to the thin documentary record on the African Burial Ground may someday come to light, but for now, the skeletal and non-skeletal remains from the excavated site provide a unique window on Manhattan's African community during the colonial and early federal periods.

Here we summarize the key archaeological findings presented in this report. We revisit the research agenda and the archaeological methods used to address it. We then review the findings and their implications and identify topics for future study.

Ancestors, descendants, and the research agenda

Howard University's New York African Burial Ground Project is a bioarchaeological investigation conducted by multidisciplinary teams of archaeologists, bioanthropologists, and historians with expertise on Africa and the African Diaspora. Inaugurated in 1993 under a contract with the U.S. General Services Administration, the Project's investigation of the cemetery is an outcome of public intervention.

Archaeologists, bioanthropologists, and historians are accountable to their peers and professional associations but also to their "ethical" clients—the people whose lives we study and the descendant communities our studies impact. Members of the descendant community and their allies were steadfastly committed to ensuring that the skeletal remains uncovered at the site were treated respectfully and re-interred with dignity, that African-American scholars were appointed to direct the scientific study, and that the realities of enslavement in colonial Manhattan be brought to wide public attention.¹ Howard University's New York African Burial Ground Project owes much to the vigilance of African-Americans and others who wanted to learn the truth about their urban predecessors and to recover a history that has been hidden for centuries. Their intervention was a crucial and deciding factor in how the Project's research agenda was designed and implemented.

Four overarching topics of concern to the descendent community were identified during public hearings. These topics included the cultural and geographical origins of the men, women, and children whose remains were uncovered at the cemetery; the quality of their lives under captivity; the ways they resisted enslavement; and the transformation from African to African-American—in other words, the ways they made new identities and formed new communities.

The language of this report as well as its scope and substance addresses the concerns of the descendent community. The African-American descendant community is multi-dimensional and ideologically heterogeneous. Even so, all felt that the term "slave" was insulting and outdated, and expressed a strong preference for the use of "captive Africans" to describe the individuals laid to rest at the African Burial Ground. The term "captive African" differs substantially from the word "slave." "Captive" used as an adjective rather than a noun avoids denoting the condition under which people lived as if it were their entire identity. As a mark of respect for the African-American community, whose members have the greatest right to speak for the black population of New

¹ The New York African Burial Ground Project has an Office of Public Education and Interpretation that informs and involves the public in the scientific research. Based in New York City, the office is supported and operated under the auspices of the U.S. General Services Administration. It was headed until September 2005 by Dr. Sherrill Wilson.

Amsterdam/New York, the researchers under Howard University's auspices refer to the ancestors with a phrase their descendants have chosen.

Location and dating of the excavated site

Standard archaeological methods were used to turn the material record into information that might speak to the research agenda. Our first methodological task as historical archaeologists was to sort out the spatial and temporal dimensions of the excavated site. This involved systematizing the excavation and laboratory records, reconstructing the stratigraphic position of each grave, and charting the development of the cemetery during and after its use as a burial ground (Chapters 1, 2, and 3; the site map, Figure 1.7).

The historic African Burial Ground was situated at the edge of the Collect Pond, on the once-northerly outskirts of New Amsterdam/New York.² Farms owned by Africans and Europeans were established in the area in the 1640s. The cemetery may date back to that time. Though graves in the excavated portion may span much of the cemetery's period of use, it is not possible to determine whether the earliest generations of captive Africans who labored in colonial Manhattan were interred within the excavated site.

The excavated site, which was in the northern part of the historic African Burial Ground, overlapped a former fence line that once separated the Van Borsum patent from the Calk Hook Farm; these two parcels of land were granted to Dutchmen during the second half of the 17th century. By the mid 18th century, the Van Borsum patent had come to be known as the "Negroes Burial Ground."

The excavated site, and the cemetery as a whole, was dramatically impacted by several phases of development, civic and private, industrial and residential. The excavated site included a portion of the cemetery that was very densely used and a portion that was relatively thinly used (south and north of the fence line, respectively). It is possible the cemetery grew in area during its early period, and then contracted during the second half of the 18th century as various kinds of development encroached. After 1730, factories such as the Crolus and Remmey pottery; institutions such as a military barracks, an almshouse and a jail; and residential construction including houses, fences, and outbuildings encroached upon the cemetery. With this encroachment, the density of interments and the superimposition of graves within the remaining ground would have increased.

After 1795, intensive, full-scale development covered the area, damaging or destroying some of the graves while bypassing others. Mechanical stripping of the site down to grave shaft outlines or, worse, the tops of coffins themselves resulted in further loss of the original ground surface during the construction of the 290 Broadway Federal Office

² The location near water may have held spiritual significance for some of the African people who used the burial ground. In some coastal West African and West Central African communities, cemeteries were associated with bodies of water where spirits reside (Ferguson 1992, 1999; Medford 2004:150-152, 196; Samford 1994; Thompson 1983:135-38; Thompson and Cornet 198:197-98).

Building in 1991. This may have obliterated irreplaceable material evidence of early African American burial practices.

Relative and absolute dating of the graves was complicated by the paucity of material culture found in direct association with the skeletal remains and from within the grave shafts. We therefore used a combination of factors to establish relative temporal groups. Burials were assigned to one of four groups based on physical features (fence lines and concentrated areas of pottery waste), artifact dating, burial stratigraphy and spatial patterning, and coffin shape (Chapter 4).

The Early Group (n=51) includes adults with four-sided coffins that tapered toward the foot and the children associated with the adults. Many of the graves underlay, and some were truncated by, ensuing burials. Early Group burials seem to pre-date the heavy dumping of kiln waste from nearby potteries, which were in operation by 1730.

Most burials (n=259) lacked strong evidence for earlier or later assignment, and thus were placed in a Middle Group (n=199) or Late-Middle Group (n=60). Stratigraphic relationships, and occasionally artifacts from grave shafts or coffins, were the primary criteria for inclusion in the Late-Middle Group. Since temporal assignments are based on relative factors, the list of burials in the middle groups cannot be considered definitive or absolute. This holds especially for children. The higher proportion of children in the Middle Group probably indicates that some of these children's graves should be assigned to the Late-Middle Group or even to the Late Group. But there is no way to sort out which ones.

Assignment to the Late Group (n=114) was based on location north of the former boundary fence (which apparently stood until the British occupation of the city during the Revolutionary War) and/or the presence of artifacts with *termini post quem* of similar or later dates; in a few cases, stratigraphic relationships to other burials was a determining factor. The removal of the fence is used to date the Late Group.

Burial practices within the excavated site

Our second methodological task was to examine patterns in burial practice for the site as a whole as well as within and across each temporal group (Chapters 5 through 9). What was typical and what was unusual in how African New Yorkers interred their community's dead? Seven aspects of burial practice were examined: coffin use, grave orientation, body position, individual versus co-interment, burial attire, the presence of adornment and other possessions or goods, and grave markers. In addition, we also looked at the cemetery's internal geography. Were the graves of men, women, and children arranged in configurations or distributed evenhandedly? Was there any patterning along gender or generational lines?

Four of these variables showed remarkable homogeneity regardless of the deceased's age, sex, or temporal group assignment. These include coffin use (91.6%), body orientation with the head to the west (97.8%), extended supine body position (100%), and individual

burial. Only two coffins contained more than one individual, and relatively few grave shafts were shared.

We think shrouding of the dead may also have been typical. Small, copper-alloy straight pins with wire-wound heads were among the most numerous artifacts recovered in direct association with the deceased—only coffin remains (Chapter 10) outnumbered pins. Straight pins were observed in and/or recovered from half of the burials. In the absence of cloth or any evidence for street clothes, winding sheets or shrouds without durable fasteners may reasonably be inferred (Chapter 11).

The case for grave markers as a typical burial practice is unclear. Grave markers were observed in the southwest corner of the excavated site, an area where the original ground surface was still intact. Grave markers took the form of smooth stone cobbles (arranged on the ground in lines and in one case an arc, so as to demarcate a grave or possibly groups of graves) and of rectangular stone slabs (placed vertically at the heads of the graves). Since such markers were found in the one area where their preservation was possible, we think it is likely that markers were used elsewhere at the cemetery. It is likely that a vertical wood post attached to the headboard of a coffin marked a grave in the northern part of the site; presumably, the post extended above the ground.

Relatively few individuals appear to have been buried in street clothing (indicated by the types and locations of buttons and cuff links directly associated with the skeletal remains). Personal adornment and other goods were also unusual. Among the items recovered were glass beads (nine of which were likely manufactured in western Africa); finger rings and metal jewelry; and coins, shells, pipes, and unique objects such as a small ceramic ball with an embossed metal band. It is also possible that floral tributes had been placed in a few of the graves (Chapters 12, 13, and 14).

Most burials were placed within a foot or two of neighboring graves but the internal geography of the excavated site was not uniform. In addition to shared grave shafts, there were several locations where burials appeared either to have been clustered together or placed in possible rows.

The shared or possible shared grave shafts (n=26) held two (but sometimes three) individuals, typically infants or young children (n=11) or an infant or a child with an adult (n=12 or 13). In some cases, the individuals in shared or possible shared grave shafts appear to have been interred at the same time; in other cases there may have been an interval after which a second burial was placed in a grave shaft already in use.

Burial clusters encompassed individuals from different age groups (infants and young children interred near adults) as well as child burials and, occasionally, pairs of adults. Possible rows of graves (aligned roughly north-to-south) were easiest to discern in the northern part of the site, although some of these apparent rows may have extended all the way to the site's southern edge.

In the northern part of the site, where graves were not as crowded as elsewhere, burial practices as well as the demographic profile were somewhat distinct. There was a preponderance of men, and almost all of the coffin-less burials were here. Clothing fasteners were more frequent, as were goods such as coins, knives, and pipes. We think that burial practices in this area reflect both a shorter period of use and a response to the demographic displacement and social privation that accompanied the Revolutionary War. There was a large influx of fugitive Africans during the British occupation, followed by a mass exodus after the British troops decamped. With the exception of the northern part of the site, the graves of men, women, and children were distributed more or less evenly across the excavated space.

Differences in burial practices for men and women were not observed. While men were more likely than women to have been buried without coffins, we attribute this to the increased presence of men during the Revolutionary War. Buttons were more typically associated with men, but since workingwomen's clothing from that era seldom fastened with buttons, it is not possible to state that men were more likely to be buried in street clothes. Pollen representing possible floral tributes was identified with more men than women but the sample is too small to generalize from. The two south-headed burials for which sex could be determined held women; the east-headed burials held either men or children.

Burial practices for adults and children differed in some ways. All children had coffins, (except for one infant who was buried in the arms of a woman), even in the northern part of the site where numerous adults had none. The shapes of children's coffins appear to have varied throughout the site's entire time span; in contrast, adult coffins were more uniform once the shoulder-shaped variety was adopted (from the Middle Group on). One possible explanation is that children's coffins were more likely to be made by families rather than purchased. Pins are present in all age groups but they were observed in a higher percentage of children's graves than adults' graves. Many adults had pins on the cranium only, which was much less common proportionally for children. Some infants had pins along their entire bodies, and a purely functional explanation is unlikely. It is possible pins had a special role in the ritual preparation of the bodies of youngsters.

Buttons were not found with children, but, as was the case with women, some pins may have fastened children's clothes. Adornment was just as likely to be found on children as on women (beads and rings) and men (decorative buttons and cuff links). Glass beads, a silver pendent, and a glass and metal filigree ornament were recovered with young children and infants. Unlike adults, children could not have obtained adornments on their own; children's adornments were gifts from adults, whether bestowed in life or at death.

Individuals and communities

Variation in burial practice at a public cemetery in use for a century or more is not unexpected, particularly in a cemetery serving an urban community that continually absorbed newcomers from a wide range of cultures and places. Yet the scope of variation

at the African Burial Ground was narrow. Viewed from the excavated site, a typical or “proper” burial in African New Amsterdam/New York entailed a coffin large enough to hold a supine, extended body that was probably covered with a shroud and placed head-to-west in a grave of its own.

We had assumed that a “proper” burial would have multiple configurations because no documentary evidence about municipal or outsider oversight of the cemetery came to light. Municipal codes enacted during the 1720s and 1730s specified the time and size of black funerals but carried no stipulations about coffin use, grave orientation, burial attire, or the positioning of the corpse. No evidence that white New Yorkers played a role at the gravesides in the African Burial Ground has been found (Chapter 2).

It seems, however, that black New Yorkers may have arrived at a provisional consensus about how to deal with death early on.³ The consistency in the archaeological record suggests that a model of a proper burial was in place by the time the graves in the excavated portion of the cemetery had been interred. Conformity can be seen in the context of the individual’s relationship to family and to the larger community. Funerals were communal and public expressions of loss, transformation, and restoration, and the cemetery provided a space where such rituals could help to forge a developing African American identity.

It is clear, though, that the concept of a proper burial was elastic enough to accommodate the expression of individuality. Consider, for example, four distinctive interments in the excavated portion of the African Burial Ground. Each of the individuals (in Burials 340, 22, 101, and 147, one from each of our temporal groups), had a coffin, was probably shrouded, had been laid with the head to the west, and was in a grave of his or her own. Each also had skeletal indicators of work, illness, or nutritional stress that remind us of their likely common lot as captive laborers in an 18th-century city.⁴ Each, however, was buried with distinctive items.

Burial 340, an Early Group grave of a woman between thirty-nine and sixty-four years old, was buried with an African-style strand of beads around her waist. Her molecular genetic affinities point to West Africa, and her incisors were modified, suggesting African nativity—but skeletal evidence suggests a later life of hard labor and possible nutritional stress. Though skeletal preservation was generally poor, the bones showed several pathologies, including scarring on the femurs where the muscles attached and hypertrophy (the enlargement of an area of bone probably caused by repeated stress) on the scapulae and ulnae (shoulders and lower arms). Moderate osteoarthritis affected the hip and the vertebrae of the neck and lower back, and there was possible evidence of anemia in the cranial bone.

³ The author thanks Grey Gundaker for articulating the idea of a “provisional consensus” with reference to burial practices.

⁴ The Howard University Skeletal Biology Team provided information on skeletal pathologies and on genetic and chemical analyses.

This woman's distinctive African-style adornment seems to bespeak her commitment to her cultural ancestry.⁵ Women's waist beads, associated as they are with femininity, sexuality, and female friendship, are recognizable as a form of adornment that had a wide geographical spread in western and central Africa.

Burial 22, a Middle Group grave of a child between two-and-a-half and four-and-a-half years old, was found with a shell (clam, of a species native to New York waters) located above the left collarbone. Perhaps the shell was placed in the coffin by mourners for its association with water, to mark the ritual transformation of the child's status via an analogy between crossing through water and crossing from life to death. The use of shells in this manner is known from Africa and the African Diaspora. The child in *Burial 22* was probably born in New York, and strontium isotope levels measured in the teeth support this assumption, falling within the narrow range of the other young children in the sample tested. During his or her short life, the child suffered from an infection or an injury that left scars on the bones of the lower and upper limbs.

The shouldered coffin that held the child straddled two underlying adult burials, one of a woman (*Burial 46*) and the other of a probable man (*Burial 29*). The child and the adults were part of a cluster of graves bordered by a row of white cobblestones, apparently water-smoothed rocks. This style of grave marking has been observed throughout the African Diaspora over a broad temporal span. The relationship of the child to others in the community probably guided the placement of the grave within this cluster.

Burial 101, of a man in his early thirties, was assigned to the Late-Middle Group. Lead levels in his teeth were consistent with African birth, while strontium isotope levels overlapped the ranges of both American and African birth. Preservation of the skeleton was excellent, and several pathologies were observed, including bone scarring due to inflammation from bacterial infection or injury on the cranium and legs. The muscle attachments at the man's elbows were enlarged from stress, mild to severe arthritis affected his joints, layers of his teeth indicated that he experienced nutritional stress in childhood, and cavities were severe (he probably had abscesses and perhaps infections of the surrounding bone). The tibiae were malformed in a way called "saber shin," suggesting he had yaws.

⁵ Although there appears to have been a substantial break in the continuity of waist bead wearing in the African Diaspora, waist beads have in recent years become fashionable among some African-descendent women in the United States as a way of reclaiming and proclaiming their African identities. A similar practice may be the African-American "nation sack," a bundle or bag of varied materials worn on a string around a woman's waist. A nation sack is intended to protect the wearer rather than to ornament her. It worn beneath the clothing and is seen only occasionally by close female kin, never by men.

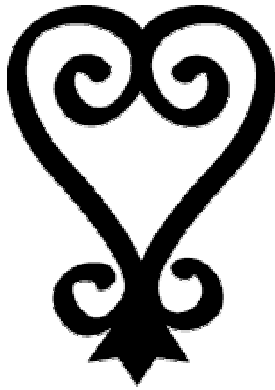


Figure 15.1.
One version of the West
African Sankofa symbol.
Source: MacDonald
(2001).

This man's coffin lid was decorated with a heart-shaped design formed of tinned or silvered iron tacks with an interior pattern formed of smaller tacks.⁶ Heart-shaped decorations may not have evoked the same meanings for Africans as for Europeans. The coffin design may have called to mind the Sankofa symbol (Figure 15.1) that originated with the Akan people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast; the symbol refers to of the need to remember one's ancestors (Chapter 8).⁷ If the mourners who interred the man in Burial 101 viewed the heart-shaped decoration as a Sankofa symbol, then the design on the coffin lid would provide evidence of the portability of expressive culture and its importance to cultural survival. The multivalence of a familiar sign provided the opportunity to incorporate an African symbol into a funeral observance.

Burial 147, one of the Late Group graves, held the remains of one of the oldest individuals in the excavated sample, a man between fifty-five and sixty-five years old when he died. His arm and leg bones had scarring from infection or injury, and the sites of muscle attachments were enlarged from repeated stress. Moderate to severe osteoarthritis affected all of the major joint complexes and the spine. Porous bones of the cranium and eye orbits suggested nutritional stress in childhood, possibly anemia, and childhood nutritional deficiencies were also recorded in his teeth (hypoplasias).

The man was buried with a cluster of small copper-alloy wire rings between his upper right arm and chest. Pins that were aligned precisely along his right upper arm indicated that cloth may have been attached in that location, possibly enclosing the rings—perhaps an armband or underarm pouch. The rings may have been part of a conjuring bundle of some kind, which would have been concealed on his person in life. This elderly man may have had powers that were offered to or sought out by others in the community. His conjuring apparatus went with him to the grave, perhaps pointing to a close association of the items themselves with the practitioner. The location of the burial, in the northern part

⁶ Iron tacks may have been chosen for this coffin based on the symbolic importance of iron in some African cultures (Puckett 1926:218, Thompson 1983:52-61) and in African-American conjuration (Puckett 1926:208, 230, 237, 252, 277, 478).

⁷ James Denbow offers another interpretation of the Sankofa/heart shape. His study of heart-shaped designs on tombstones dating to the early 20th century in the Loango coast of West Central Africa found that the "heart" was perceived as the location of "the soul of the inner body, called *mwela* [...] manifested physically by the breath" (Denbow 1999:412). Thus, Denbow saw the heart shape as representing the soul of the deceased. Perhaps the symbol was recognized (though differently) by both West and West-Central Africans. As Fennell (2003:23-24) noted, symbols become widespread through cultural contact, and cultures assign nuances of encoded meaning to them. However, Denbow also cites earlier sources that considered the soul to be contained in the head, and represented heads as "cruciform and helioform" (Denbow 1999:413). The "heart" as a two-lobed, pointed-base figure does not necessarily represent the concept as it would have been expressed in the 18th century Loango region.

of the cemetery, suggests that he died during or after the Revolution, and it is possible he was one of the many refugees who came to the city during the war.

Ancestors, cultural roots, and the transformation of African to African American identities

Characteristic of today's African American sensibility is the apparently straightforward query, "Who are your people?" This question asks both "Where did you come from?" and "How do we relate to one another?" The abhorrent circumstances under which people were separated from their families and homelands complicates the search for origins and cultural roots of African-descendant people throughout the Diaspora. The multidisciplinary African Burial Ground Project has developed new lines of data, and a host of questions, about the origins of early African New Yorkers, through historical research, preliminary genetic and craniometric data, and archaeological analysis.

As noted, the project's History Report (Medford 2004) highlights the scope of the trade in captives and the range of societies from which the burial ground population derived. The Skeletal Biology Report (Blakey and Rankin-Hill 2004) has examined the physical remains of the ancestors for indications of their places of origin. Their research found a range of probable birthplaces, from the continent of Africa to the Caribbean to New York. The archaeology has been less specific in its investigation of roots. But what we do observe in a number of instances is that even if today we cannot read specific places in Africa from the material record, we can read that people were declaring to one another that their people were African.

Although none of the objects associated with distinctive burials precisely answers the question of origins, the mobilization of material culture is a thread that appears to run through the temporal groups. It would not be surprising if materials and associations that held particular significance in Africa continued to be important to African people in New York. The deceased may have been people newly captured from Africa (possibly in Burials 340 and 101), a child born into captivity in New York (Burial 22), or second- or third-generation African-Americans whose forbears maintained and transmitted African cultural practices despite, or as a respite from, the brutality of their lives in North America (the elderly man in Burial 147). The material from these graves clearly points out that at least some of the African people of 18th-century New York remembered and honored their ancestral traditions.

Future research

The archaeological excavation of the New York African Burial Ground has opened a window on how Africans under slavery cared for their dead in a key center of colonial America's urban north. It makes sense, then, to design research agendas around the findings the burial ground's archaeological record has brought to light. Future research might focus more deeply on how African New Yorkers used the burial ground for community purposes of their own. Several lines of investigation show promise of

providing a fuller grasp of the cemetery as a setting for reshaping social ties within and across generations:

- 1) The connections among individuals interred in close proximity, be it within the same grave shaft or within a burial cluster. Genetic analysis of the remains might reveal kinship or home-place ties between the individuals in these graves. Such information, if coupled with data on nutrition, disease, and physical trauma, might yield a more fine-grained picture of the biocultural experiences that marked kin, compatriots, or friends whose graves were clustered together.⁸
- 2) Rural-to-urban migration during the Revolutionary War and its immediate aftermath. During the 1700s, the promise of freedom pulled Africans from near and far to New York City, but the movement of blacks into Manhattan accelerated during the British occupation. A systematic look at documentation relevant to Africans on the move after 1776, along with a close examination of the bioskeletal signatures of Late Group burials, might furnish insights into the social/regional roots of the burial patterns and material culture in the northern part of the cemetery.
- 3) The social and material production of a “proper” burial in the independent black churches that provided burial facilities after the African Burial Ground had closed. How was the “proper” burial of the 17th/18th century reconfigured in the liturgies and in the burial yards and vaults of the city’s 19th century black churches? Were the accouterments, logistics, and divisions of labor that comprised a “proper” burial altered during periods of heightened social suffering, such as the yellow fever or cholera years? Using the African Burial Ground as a baseline might offer a more sophisticated grasp of how a rite of passage is remade when the organizing structures in the world around it have changed.

We suggest a new look at one of the key stories of early African American history in New York, the founding of the A.M.E. Zion and St. Philip’s Churches. It should make a difference if one imagines, as we do, that the African Burial Ground provided an institutional basis as well as founding personnel for the churches. The African Methodist and Episcopal churches might have had a century and a half worth of African and then African-American religious philosophy and ritual practice upon which to build.

More generally, the information obtained from the African Burial Ground archaeological investigation adds significantly to an ever-growing database on the historic material culture of the African Diaspora. It is hoped that the findings reported here will be useful to a large research community. For example, changing ritual practices of African descendant people and the symbolic dimensions of their material culture should continue to be interrogated through African eyes. Symbols, especially those used by oppressed

⁸ We assume that African people buried at the cemetery formed families—quite simply, the birth of children would have begun families, and however strained the logistics of maintaining ties, family relationships would have built exponentially.

populations, are not necessarily accessible to outsiders; the multivalent aspect of symbolic practices enables divergent meanings to be cloaked. Historical archaeologists, with input from historians, anthropologists, and folklorists, continually explore new ways to recognize and interpret symbols used by African-Americans. Fresh examination of objects and their associations should continue to be fruitful, and it is hoped that items recovered at the African Burial Ground will become part of this broader project.

The archaeological data from the New York African Burial Ground should continue to be analyzed within a worldwide context. This site did not exist in a historical, geographic, or cultural vacuum. As important as the African Burial Ground is, the excavated site offers but a glimpse of African life in a cosmopolitan center of colonial American. The burial ground adds to a growing multidimensional perspective Africans during the 17th and 18th centuries, but it bears closer comparison to other sites in Africa, North and South America, and the Caribbean.

The African Burial Ground will not be forgotten again. This is due as much to the keen interest of African descendants in their community's material past as to the insights and data compiled here. The research offers new avenues for teaching and learning about the people of the African Diaspora and for hearing their long-stifled voices. We hope this report, along with the Skeletal Biology Report and the History Report, will inspire and educate both academics and the public. We also hope to engage students, colleagues, and the public in a broader examination of the African-American past and to create inclusive histories that transform our views of the past, the present, and the future. Creating inclusive histories involves breaking down boundaries between the academy and African-American descendant communities so that we all can learn from oral history, apply African-American perspectives on material culture, and create memorials that honor the long history of the African Diaspora.

EPILOGUE

Warren R. Perry

The African Burial Ground has become a symbol of the strength, spirit, and agency of African descendant people in New York over nearly four centuries of exploitation and inequality. The site has attracted tens of thousands of visitors and is the focus of deeply felt reverence by many people in the United States, Africa and throughout the African Diaspora.

The Rites of Ancestral Return culminated in New York City on Friday, October 3 and Saturday, October 4, 2003. Four individual coffins, representing the men, women, boys, and girls among the ancestors, were brought in a procession up Broadway to the African



Mother Delois Blakeley heads the procession of the coffins from Wall Street to the African Burial Ground.
Photograph by Sherrill D. Wilson.

Burial Ground Memorial Site. The event was both a funeral and a celebration, and the ceremonies were exhilarating as well as profoundly solemn. An overnight vigil marked the ancestors' last hours away from their rightful resting place.

Dr. Michael Blakey and the Institute for Historical Biology at the College of William and Mary, which he now heads, invited African Burial Ground Project staff and researchers to attend a Friday night reception in the Presidential Suite at the

Millennium Hilton Hotel. Following this event, several members of the Howard University research teams returned to the site to pay final respects to the ancestors before the next day's re-interment ceremonies.

It was nearing midnight when we arrived at the memorial site. It had been a long and emotionally charged day, but each of us felt drawn to spend a last few personal moments with the ancestors, remembering them not as the subjects of scientific research but as living people who had endured lives of pain and struggle, love and sadness, strength and meaning.

Most of the day's attendees had left by this time. Among those who remained were several members of the descendant community who had spoken out and advocated for the ancestors since the early 1990s, among them Queen Mother Delois Blakely, Queen Mother Jordan, and the Chief Alagba Egunfemi Adegbolola. The night had gone chill

and the spotlights had gone out, but the descendants that remained seemed to draw light and heat and sustenance from the presence of the once-forgotten ones who were returning to their rightful place.



Wooden coffins, hand-carved in Ghana, held the ancestors' remains for reburial at the African Burial Ground. Photograph by Anne and Jon Abbott.

We offered our farewell to the ancestors and turned to leave, passing by the memorial site and the platform on which many of the descendants still clustered. As we walked up Elk Street, a young man ran up from behind. Mother Blakely had sent him to ask for elders for the naming ceremony. "Would we come back to participate?" the young man asked.

Our first impulse was to offer a polite excuse and continue on. It was cold, we were tired, and

the morning's observances were but a few hours away. But the voices of the ancestors resounded in our heads:

*Were we not cold?
Were we not tired?
Did we not wish for home and rest?*

We could not refuse this summons, on the eve of their reburial, and we returned to the site, where Dr. Michael Blakey, as the project's Scientific Director, was to be named in the African tradition. We spoke in low voices, which could not have been overheard: "I am cold," and at that moment a blanket was offered; "I am tired," and a chair appeared almost from thin air. We felt as though the ancestors had acknowledged our sincerity in returning to the vigil and favored us with respite from our discomforts.

It has been a tremendous privilege to work for the African Burial Ground Project. "Privilege," in this case, is not to be confused with "ease." In many ways it has been one of the most difficult projects we will ever conduct. It was also one of the most spiritually rewarding. We have been blessed to be offered the opportunity to share a fraction of the ancestors' experiences: the hard work, the setbacks, the pain of loss. We also have been blessed by the strength and sense of purpose that comes from building a cadre of committed workers. Much as the ancestors built new social networks, cultures, and identities for themselves, the people who have worked and fought for the African Burial Ground have shared deep bonds. The ancestors inspired us to keep moving forward through our tribulations and to keep in mind that our commitment was to honor their courage, strength, and dignity.